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Carter's New Playmates in The Persian Gulf

FRED HALLIDAY

President Carter's new commitment to stand by Western interests in the Persian Gulf must come as welcome news to the assorted monarchs and military dictators on whom the beneficence of a newly assertive U.S. Administration is about to be bestowed. Some of these gentry have already attracted the skeptical attention of Western observers: neither the monarchy of Saudi Arabia nor the fervid Islamic generals of Islamabad rate high on the human-rights scales. Yet there are other less prominent rulers whose credentials may also bear some examination in the light of Washington's new claims to be defending Western values in that region, not least the Amir of Bahrain, who has proferred hospitality to the U.S. Navy since 1949, and the Sultan of Oman, who has just last week opened the door to Uncle Sam with the offer of a military base.

The Amir of Bahrain may at first sight appear a rather harmless buffoon. Sheik Isa ibn Sulman al-Khalifa, 46, is best known for his two favorite pastimes: racing horses and chasing English stewardesses, whom he invites to a private beach near his palace from which all Arab women are banned. His favorite companion is a former air hostess named Margaret who commutes regularly between London and the Bahraini capital of Manama at the Amir's expense.

But the jolly Amir has a more macabre side, concealed from many Western visitors by the appearance of prosperity and the relaxed social atmosphere in the island state. Bahrain has the longest history of education and also of political unrest among the Arab Gulf states, and since the 1950s there has been a strong movement among intellectuals and workers demanding democratic rights. In 1956, 1965 and 1970 the Government had to resort to widespread arrests to preserve the absolute power of the al-Khalifas. After becoming formally independent of Britain in 1971, Bahrain tried a limited experiment in democracy. A draft Constitution was announced, under which a highly restricted national assembly would have come into existence. The assembly was then duly elected—but only after women had been deprived of the vote promised in the Constitution draft. And when the assembly, at most only a talking shop, became too critical of the ruling family, it was unceremoniously closed down in August 1975. In the subsequent repression a number of opposition leaders were shot or tortured to death by the police.

The latest issue of the underground paper *Khamsa Mars* (March 5) lists the names of seventy-six people arrested in the latter part of last year for underground political activities. Some are radicals influenced by the revolution in Iran, others are members of a Trades Union Founding Committee that has been especially active among the workers at the ALBA aluminum plant, the largest industrial enterprise on the island. A world that is rightly indignant at Andrei Sakharov's deportation to a provincial town should also spare a thought for the dozens of people facing a much worse fate, and without any international protest, in one of the countries Carter has now decided to sustain so avidly.

Security in Bahrain is under the command of two long-standing British counterinsurgency experts, Ian Henderson, a veteran of the Mau Mau campaign in Kenya in the 1950s, and Maj. Gen. Jim Bell. But although the Bahrain Defense Force—the Amir's army—gets its arms from Britain, the United States has since 1949 operated a naval facility at Bahrain, which serves as the headquarters for its Middle East Force. The ships of MIDEASTFOR serve not only as an American presence in the Gulf but also carry out important communications and reconnaissance activities. Although the Government occasionally promises to terminate U.S. occupancy of the base, it has not in fact done so.

Bahrain, a country with an acute demand for liberalization, is therefore still ruled by an autocratic Amir, backed by his British myrmidons. Farther down the Gulf rules Sultan Qabus of Oman, who was installed by the British intelligence service in July 1970, in order to replace his stubborn father. Qabus has never wavered in blocking democracy, refusing even to allow the kind of token tribal assembly of majlis that is found in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. He recently told *The Financial Times* of London that such assemblies are "an inefficient and time-wasting way of running a modern state." The result is that no democratic liberties of any kind are allowed and Qabus rules without any limits, flanked by an assortment of relatives and merchants.

Soon after coming to power Qabus began to put distance between himself and the British, and relations between him and London are now somewhat strained. The British believe that Qabus's passionate, unswerving dedication to creating a modern state (i.e., his ruthless dictatorship) may generate new popular opposition. Privately, they scorn his grandiose self-image as the man whose country guards the lifeline of the West at the twenty-six-mile Straits of Hormuz.

Qabus, for his part, takes no chances with the British, and since 1971 he has received a secret subsidy from the Central Intelligence Agency, channeled through Saudi Arabia, which enables him to run his own security force independent of the British, according to a February 3, 1972, article in the authoritative *Economist Foreign Report*. The 4,000-strong militarized police, used for counterinsurgency operations alongside the army, is the linchpin of the wary Sultan's backup self-defense system.

Power in the country is said to lie with three men. The Sultan himself doubles as Prime Minister Minister of

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